Socio-Legal Dynamics of Nuptial Processions in the First-Century Mediterranean: A Juridical and Archaeological Re-evaluation of the Matthean *Parthenoi*

1. Introduction

The narrative of the ten *parthenoi* (virgins) in Matthew 25:1–13 has long served as a locus of theological allegorization, yet its structural integrity rests upon a foundation of specific, recognizable socio-legal realities of the first-century Mediterranean world. The central question posed by this investigation—whether it is historically and legally plausible to identify these ten figures as brides rather than attendants—demands a rigorous exorcism of theological presupposition. Instead, we must reconstruct the nuptial landscape of the era through the lens of Roman civil law (*ius civile*), Jewish halakhic tradition (*halakha*), and the material culture of the Levant.

The first century C.E. in Judea was a period of intense legal pluralism, where indigenous Jewish customs intersected with, and were occasionally superseded by, Imperial Roman jurisdiction. Marriage, as the fundamental unit of social organization and property transfer, was heavily regulated by both systems. To determine the identity of the ten *parthenoi*, we must dissect the legal definitions of marriage, the phenomenon of polygyny (multiple wives), the mechanics of the wedding procession (*pompa nuptialis* or *hakhnasat kallah*), and the precise roles assigned to women within these rituals.

The hypothesis that the ten virgins represent ten simultaneous brides participating in a polygamous wedding feast faces a gauntlet of historical verification. We must weigh the legal permissibility of polygamy against its demographic prevalence; we must contrast the linguistic designation of *parthenos* against *nymphe*; and we must analyze the ritual logistics of the wedding procession to see if "going out to meet" the groom with lamps is an act of a bride or a servant. This report asserts, through exhaustive analysis of primary sources—from the *Babatha* archive in the Judean Desert to the legal codices of Rome—that the identification of the *parthenoi* as brides is legally and culturally untenable, pointing instead to a specialized role of ritual accompaniment deeply embedded in the civic and religious life of antiquity.

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2. The Juridical Framework of Marriage in the Early

Empire

To identify the participants in a wedding, one must first understand the legal contract that bound them. The definition of "bride" (*nymphe* or *kallah*) was not merely social but strictly juridical. In the first century, a woman's transition from *parthenos* (virgin) to *gynē* (wife/woman) occurred within a rigid framework of property exchange, potestas (authority), and religious sanction.

2.1. Roman *Matrimonium*: The Monogamous Imperative

For any analysis of a text circulating within the Roman Empire, the Roman legal definition of marriage is paramount. Roman law (*ius matrimonium*) was aggressively monogamous. This stands as the primary socio-legal barrier to interpreting the "ten virgins" as a collective of brides in any context involving Roman citizens or those aspiring to Roman social norms.

2.1.1. The Illegality of Polygamy

In the Roman worldview, marriage was the union of two persons, a "partnership for the whole of life" (*consortium omnis vitae*). Polygamy was not merely illegal; it was culturally abhorrent, associated with "barbarian" excess.

- **The Legal Stance:** A Roman citizen could legally contract marriage (*conubium*) with only one spouse at a time. Contracting a second marriage while the first remained valid was an act of *stuprum* (illicit sexual union) or bigamy, rendering the second union void and subjecting the participants to *infamia* (legal disgrace).
- **Imperial Policy:** The Augustan moral legislation (*Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* of 18 BCE and *Lex Papia Poppaea* of 9 CE) heavily regulated marriage to encourage procreation among the elite. These laws reinforced the monogamous nuclear family as the state's building block. A narrative depicting a ten-wife wedding would strike a Roman audience not as a valid wedding feast, but as a chaotic, illicit assembly, unless specifically framed as a foreign royal harem.

2.1.2. Forms of Marital Authority

Roman marriage in this period operated under two modes of authority, which dictated the bride's legal standing during the procession.

- **Cum Manu (With Hand):** The wife passed from her father's authority (*patria potestas*) to her husband's authority (*manus*). This form was archaic but still practiced in elite circles via *Confarreatio*, a sacred ceremony presided over by the *Flamen Dialis* (High Priest of Jupiter) and requiring **ten witnesses** (*decem testes*).[1]
- **Sine Manu (Without Hand):** By the first century, this was the dominant form. The bride remained under her father's legal authority (or that of a guardian). This is crucial for the procession: the *deductio* (leading of the bride) was the physical manifestation of the transfer of domicile, even if legal authority did not change. The bride was the passive

object of transfer, not an active welcomer.[3]

2.2. Jewish *Kiddushin* and *Nissuin*: The Two-Stage Union

In Judea, the legal structure of marriage was distinct from Rome, characterized by a bifurcation of the marital process into two legally binding stages separated by time. This temporal gap is the essential context for the parable of the ten virgins.

2.2.1. Stage One: *Erusin* (Betrothal)

The first stage, *Erusin* (or *Kiddushin*), effected the legal acquisition of the wife.

- **Mechanism:** The groom enacted the acquisition (*kinyan*) through money (*kesef*), a deed (*shtar*), or consummation (though the latter was discouraged by the Sages).[4]
- **Legal Status:** Following *Erusin*, the woman was legally a "wife" (*eshet ish*). If the groom died, she was a widow. To break the engagement, a formal writ of divorce (*get*) was required.[6]
- **Residence:** Crucially, the bride **remained in her father's house** during this period, which typically lasted twelve months for a virgin and one month for a widow.[8] She used this time to prepare her trousseau.

2.2.2. Stage Two: *Nissuin* (The Home-Taking)

The second stage, *Nissuin*, completed the marriage.

- **The Event:** This is the setting of Matthew 25. *Nissuin* is defined by the *chuppah*, often interpreted in the first century not as a cloth canopy (a later medieval development) but as the groom's chamber or the procession itself.[10]
- **The Transfer:** The essence of *Nissuin* was the transfer of the bride from the domain of her father to the domain of her husband. This necessitated a procession. The groom would go to the bride's father's house and "take" her (*lakach*) to his own domicile.[12]
- **Implication for the Parable:** If the ten virgins were brides, they would theoretically be waiting at their *own* fathers' houses for the groom to collect them. A collective waiting room for ten brides implies a harem scenario or a mass wedding, which requires specific investigation into the prevalence of polygamy.

2.3. The Socio-Legal Reality of Polygyny in First-Century Judea

The strongest argument for the "ten brides" hypothesis rests on the legality of Jewish polygyny. However, legality does not equate to normative practice, and the distinction is vital.

2.3.1. Halakhic Permissibility

Unlike Roman law, Jewish law in the first century did not prohibit a man from having multiple wives.

- **Biblical Precedent:** The Patriarchs and Kings practiced polygamy. The Torah regulates

it (e.g., Deuteronomy 21:15-17 regarding inheritance of the firstborn from a less-loved wife).[13]

- **Josephus's Testimony:** Writing for a Roman audience, Flavius Josephus explicitly defends the practice: "For it is our ancestral custom that a man have several wives at the same time" (*Antiquities* 17.14).[15] He cites Herod the Great's nine wives as evidence.
- **Sectarian Opposition:** The Temple Scroll from Qumran (11QTemple 57:17-19) forbids the king (and likely by extension, commoners) from taking a second wife while the first is alive.[17] This indicates that polygamy was a contested issue, with some groups advocating strict monogamy.

2.3.2. Documentary Evidence: The Babatha Archive

The most granular evidence for actual practice comes from the Babatha Archive (found in the Cave of Letters, dating to the early 2nd century but reflecting 1st-century realities).

- **The Case:** Babatha married Judah son of Eleazar as his **second wife**. Documents reveal she was a co-wife (*tzarah*) to his first wife, Miriam.[13]
- **Significance:** This proves polygamy was practiced by Jews of "moderate means," not just royalty.
- **The "Ten" Problem:** While Babatha proves *bigamy* (two wives), there is zero documentary evidence from the period of a commoner marrying **ten** women. Even the wealthy Judah had only two. Polygamy was economically burdensome. The *Ketubah* (marriage contract) required the husband to guarantee food, clothing, and conjugal rights (Exodus 21:10). Maintaining ten separate *ketubot* would bankrupt all but the ultra-elite.
- **Simultaneity vs. Accumulation:** Polygamous households were usually built over time—often due to the infertility of a first wife. A simultaneous wedding of ten brides suggests a royal dynastic event (like Alexander at Susa), which contradicts the parable's setting of a local village feast with merchants and oil sellers.

Table 1: Comparative Marriage Laws (Rome vs. Judea)

Feature	Roman Law (Ius Civile)	Jewish Law (Halakha)	Implication for "Ten Brides"
Monogamy	**Strictly Enforced.** Bigamy is a crime (*stuprum*).	**Permitted but Rare.** Polygamy legal; monogamy the norm.	Roman context forbids 10 brides; Jewish context makes it economically unlikely.

Formation	Consent + Procession (*Deductio*).	Two Stages: *Erusin* (Betrothal) + *Nissuin* (Procession).	The parable depicts the transition to *Nissuin*.
Witnesses	**10 Witnesses** (*Decem Testes*) for *Confarreatio*.	2 Witnesses for *Ketubah*; **10 Men** (*Minyan*) for blessings.	The number 10 signifies the *witness quorum*, not the number of brides.
Procession Direction	Bride's House $\rightarrow$ Groom's House.	Bride's House $\rightarrow$ Groom's House.	Brides wait to be *fetched*; they do not "go out to meet" the groom on the road.
Bride's Legal Status	Minor (requires guardian/father).	"Wife" (after betrothal) but under father's roof.	Brides are protected/sequestered, not waiting in the street.

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3. The Mechanics of the *Pompa Nuptialis*: Processions and Torchbearers

The pivotal action in Matthew 25 is the procession. The virgins "took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom." Analyzing the logistics of ancient processions reveals that carrying a lamp was an act of service and honor performed *for* the bride and groom, not *by* them.

3.1. The Roman *Deductio in Domum Mariti*

The Roman wedding culminated in the *deductio*, a ritual "kidnapping" or leading of the bride to her new home. This ceremony was highly structured and legally significant, as public knowledge of the procession often served as proof of the marriage's validity.[3]

3.1.1. The Torchbearers (*Pueri*)

Central to the Roman procession were the torchbearers.

- **Participants:** The bride was escorted by **three boys** (*pueri patrimi et matrimi*—boys with both parents living). Two walked by her side, and one walked *in front* carrying the

nuptial torch (*fax nuptialis* or *spina alba*).[19]

- **Gender Specificity:** Roman custom explicitly used *male* children (*pueri*) for this role, not adolescent girls (*parthenoi*).
- **Function:** The torch was a sacred object, lit from the hearth of the bride's father. Upon arrival at the groom's house, the torch was often thrown into the crowd for good luck.[19]
- **The Bride's Role:** The Roman bride did **not** carry a torch. She was the focal point, veiled in the *flammeum*, often carrying a distaff and spindle (symbols of domesticity).[20] For the bride to carry her own light would be a breach of protocol; her status demanded she be lit by attendants.

3.2. The Jewish Procession and the "Meeting" (*Hupantesis*)

The Jewish procession was equally boisterous but distinct in its personnel. The key linguistic clue in Matthew 25 is the term *hupantesis* (to meet).

3.2.1. The Logistics of *Hupantesis*

In secular Greek and Roman literature, *hupantesis* (or *apantesis*) described a formal protocol for welcoming a dignitary (a king, magistrate, or general).[21]

- **The Mechanism:** The citizens of a city would leave the city gates, travel along the road to *meet* the dignitary, and then turn around to escort him *back* into the city.
- **Application to the Parable:** The virgins "go out to meet" the groom. This implies the groom is approaching the location where the feast will be held (likely his father's house). The virgins leave the banquet hall (or a waiting station outside), intercept the groom on the road, and escort him *in*.
- **Status Implication:** This is the role of an **escort** or **honor guard**. A bride does not "go out to meet" the groom on the road; she waits in her father's house to be claimed (as in the Roman *deductio*), or she travels *with* the groom from her house to his. She is the *object* of the procession, not the welcomer.

3.2.2. Jewish Torchbearers and Lamps

While Roman custom used boys, Jewish custom utilized female attendants for the bridal train.

- **Source Evidence:** The Talmud (*Ketubot* 17a) discusses singing and dancing before the bride, often involving myrtle branches or torches. Snippets [24] and [25] note that "young girls with torches escorted the pair."
- **Material Culture:** The "lamps" (*lampades*) mentioned were likely torches (sticks wrapped with oil-soaked rags) or Herodian oil lamps (clay vessels with a spout for a wick).[26]
    - **Archaeology:** Excavations of first-century Judean homes reveal small, handheld clay lamps. These required frequent refilling (hence the "flasks of oil").
    - **Function:** Lighting the dark streets was a necessity, but it was also a status marker. Lighting the way was a *mitzvah* (commandment) of honoring the couple.

- **The Bride's Position:** The Jewish bride (*kallah*) was often carried on a litter or rode a mule, veiled and passive.[28] She was the "Queen" for the day. Queens do not carry their own torches; their servants do.

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4. The Identity of the *Parthenoi*: Philology and Sociology

If the legal and processional evidence suggests the "ten virgins" are attendants, the linguistic evidence solidifies it. The choice of the Greek word *parthenos* over *nymphe* is deliberate and legally significant.

4.1. Philological Distinctions: *Parthenos* vs. *Nymphe*

- **Nymphe (Bride):** The specific term for a bride in the New Testament and Septuagint (LXX) is *nymphe* (equivalent to Hebrew *kallah*).
  - *Usage:* Revelation 21:2 ("prepared as a bride (*nymphe*) adorned for her husband"); John 3:29 ("he who has the bride (*nymphe*) is the bridegroom").
  - *Significance:* If the author intended to describe ten women marrying the groom, *nymphe* would be the legally correct term.
- **Parthenos (Virgin/Maiden):** The text uses *parthenos* (plural *parthenoi*).
  - *Meaning:* A young woman of marriageable age who has not yet known a man.[29]
  - *Contextual Usage:* While a bride is typically a *parthenos*, not every *parthenos* is a bride. In Greek literature, *parthenoi* often constituted the **chorus** or **attendants** at religious festivals or weddings.
  - *Psalm 45 (LXX):* A crucial intertextual link is Psalm 45:14, a royal wedding psalm. It describes the queen/bride entering the palace: "In colorful garments she is led to the king; her **virgin companions** (*parthenoi*) follow her—those brought to be with her".[31] Here, the *parthenoi* are explicitly the *re'ot* (companions/bridesmaids) of the bride, distinct from the bride herself. This biblical precedent provides the template for the "ten virgins" as the bride's entourage.

4.2. The *Shoshbinot*: Institutionalized Attendants

Jewish marriage customs institutionalized the role of the "friend" or "attendant."

- **Shoshbinim (Groomsmen):** The groom was attended by "friends of the bridegroom" (*shoshbinim* or *bnei ha-chuppah*).
  - *Function:* They guarded the groom, participated in the seven days of feasting, and acted as witnesses.[32]
  - *Samson:* Judges 14:11 records Samson having **thirty companions** (*shoshbinim*) at his wedding feast.[32]
- **Shoshbinot (Bridesmaids):** While the term is less frequent, the bride also had

attendants.
    - *Role:* To bathe, dress, and adorn the bride (the "Great Preparation"), and to escort her to the *chuppah*.
    - *The "Friend of the Bridegroom":* John 3:29 mentions the "friend of the bridegroom" (*philos tou numphiou*) who rejoices at the groom's voice. This figure parallels the role of the ten virgins: they are there to *welcome* and *rejoice*, not to marry. The wise virgins' primary concern is being ready to join the procession (*pompa*), which aligns with the duties of the *shoshbinot*.

4.3. The *Pronuba* in Roman Custom

While the parable is Jewish in setting, the Roman parallels confirm the ubiquity of the attendant role.

- **Pronuba:** The Roman bride was attended by a *Pronuba*, a matron who had been married only once (*univira*).[33] She physically joined the right hands of the couple (*dextrarum iunctio*).
- **Contrast:** The Roman attendant was an older, married woman. The Jewish attendants (*parthenoi*) were young, unmarried women. This distinction reinforces that the parable reflects **Judean custom**, not Roman, despite the Roman legal overlay. However, both systems necessitate a third party distinct from the bride to facilitate the ritual.

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5. The Significance of the Number Ten

Why "ten"? The specific number ten (*deka*) is not random; it represents a legal and ritual quorum in both Jewish and Roman society, further distancing the figures from the role of "bride."

5.1. The Jewish *Minyan* and the Wedding Blessings

In Jewish law, public sanctity requires a community.

- **The Minyan:** A quorum of ten adult males is required for public prayer.[35]
- **Birkat Chatanim (Grooms' Blessings):** The Talmud (*Ketubot* 7b) and Mishnah (*Megillah* 4:3) rule that the wedding blessings (*Sheva Brachot*) **cannot be recited with fewer than ten men**.[37]
- **Interpretation:** The presence of "ten" virgins mirrors the "ten men" required for the religious validity of the feast. They represent the **female quorum** of the community. Just as ten men are needed to bless the groom, ten maidens are needed to honor the bride and groom with light. They are the community's representatives in the ritual, symbolizing the "complete" joy of the settlement.

5.2. The *Decem Testes* of Roman *Confarreatio*

Roman law also utilized the number ten for solemn weddings.

- **Confarreatio:** As noted, this elite marriage form required **ten witnesses** (*decem testes*).[1]
- **Representation:** These ten witnesses represented the entirety of the Roman people (the *curiae*).
- **Synthesis:** Whether viewed through a Jewish or Roman lens, "ten" at a wedding signifies **witnessing** and **validating**, not marrying. A crowd of ten brides has no numerological significance in law; a crowd of ten witnesses is a foundational legal requirement.

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6. The "Virgin Israel" Metaphor and the Missing Bride

Two critical elements challenge the modern reader but were readily understood in the first century: the metaphorical use of "virgin" to denote a collective people, and the distinct legal role of the bride that renders her "invisible" in this specific narrative.

6.1. The Collective Identity of "Virgin Israel" (*Betulat Yisrael*)

The use of the term "virgin" (*parthenos*) in a Jewish parable evokes a specific national and theological metaphor prevalent in Second Temple literature.

- **Biblical Usage:** The Hebrew Bible frequently personifies the nation of Israel or the city of Jerusalem as a "virgin" (*betulah*).
  - **Amos 5:2:** "Fallen is **Virgin Israel** (*Betulat Yisrael*); she will rise no more." The Septuagint (LXX) translates this directly as *Parthenos Israel*.
  - **Jeremiah 31:4:** "Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O **Virgin Israel**!" (LXX: *Parthenos Israel*).
- **Impact on Analysis:** This metaphor establishes that "virgin" was a standard designation for the **collective community** of God's people, not just individual marriageable women. When a first-century Jewish audience heard of "ten virgins" waiting for the Lord (the Groom), the resonance would be corporate: these figures represent the *people* (Israel/Zion) waiting for their redemption, rather than ten individual women competing for a husband. The number ten (the quorum) reinforces this idea of the *representative collective*. They are the faithful remnant (or the mixed multitude) waiting to welcome the King.

6.2. The Phenomenon of the "Missing Bride"

The absence of the bride in the parable is not an oversight but a reflection of legal custom and narrative focus.

- **The Narrative Focus (The *Hupantesis*):** The action of the parable is the *hupantesis* (the meeting/escort). As established, this is a ritual where a delegation goes *out* to meet

a dignitary and escort him *in*. In this scenario, the "dignitary" is the groom.
    - **Where is the Bride?** Socio-legally, there are two possibilities, both of which explain her silence:
        1. **She is *with* the Groom:** In the *Nissuin* procession, the groom fetches the bride from her father's house and brings her to his own. If the virgins are going out to meet the groom as he returns to the banquet hall, the bride is **already in the procession**, likely inside a litter or heavily veiled (customary for the *kallah*). She is the passive "treasure" being escorted, while the active drama concerns the *servants* (the virgins) whose duty is to provide the light for this arrival.[28]
        2. **She is *inside* the House:** If the procession is arriving at the bride's father's house for the initial pickup (less likely given the "door shut" banquet imagery, but possible), the bride is sequestered inside, waiting for the groom to claim her. The virgins are the outdoor sentries.
- **Roman Legal Parallel:** In Roman comedy and law, the bride (*puella*) is often a mute character, the object of the transaction between the *paterfamilias* and the groom. The active participants in the *deductio* (procession) are the *pueri* (boys/attendants) and the public. The bride's silence in the parable aligns with her legal status as the passive object of transfer, while the "ten virgins" represent the community's active responsibility to witness and honor the event.

Table 2: Linguistic and Numerical Analysis

Term/Concept	Meaning	Function in Wedding	Applies to "Ten Virgins"?
Nymphe	Bride	The female spouse.	**No** (Term not used).
Parthenos	Virgin/Maiden	Attendant, chorus, unmarried woman.	**Yes** (Term used).
Hupantesis	Meeting	Protocol of escorting a dignitary *in*.	**Yes** (Action performed).
Minyan	Quorum (10)	Minimum for Jewish wedding blessings.	**Yes** (Matches number).
Decem Testes	10 Witnesses	Required for Roman	**Yes** (Matches

		Confarreatio.	number).
Virgin Israel	Collective Metaphor	Symbol of the Nation/People.	**Yes** (Matches corporate identity).

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7. Conclusion: The Implausibility of the "Ten Brides" Hypothesis

Based solely on the customs and laws of Rome and Judea in the first century, it is **highly implausible** that the ten virgins of Matthew 25 refer to brides.

The weight of evidence points decisively to their identification as **torchbearing attendants** (*shoshbinot* or *parthenoi* companions). This conclusion is supported by:

1. **Linguistic Evidence:** The use of *parthenos* (attendant/maiden) over *nymphe* (bride).
2. **Legal Evidence:** The correlation of the number ten with the witness quorum (*minyan*/*decem testes*) rather than spousal quantity.
3. **Processional Custom:** The act of "going out to meet" (*hupantesis*) and carrying lamps serves an escort function, distinct from the passive, honored role of the bride in both the Roman *deductio* and Jewish *hakhnasat kallah*.
4. **Socio-Economic Reality:** The extreme rarity of simultaneous polygamy outside of royalty, contrasted with the ubiquity of attendants in all weddings.
5. **The "Virgin Israel" Metaphor:** The cultural understanding of "Virgin Israel" as a collective noun for the people, reinforcing the interpretation of the ten virgins as representatives of the community waiting for the Lord, rather than literal brides.
6. **The Missing Bride:** The bride's absence is consistent with her passive legal role during the procession (*deductio*), where she is the veiled object of transfer, while the attendants (virgins) are the active participants responsible for the lights and the welcome.

The "ten virgins" are the community's daughters, enacting the ancient duty of lighting the darkness for the bridal pair, validating the union through their witness, and honoring the covenant with their presence.

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